

Sketch

Volume 50, Number 1

1983

Article 16

Labor Day

Jennie Ver Steeg*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©1983 by the authors. *Sketch* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
<http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch>

Labor Day

Jennie Ver Steeg GDC 3

You get a lot of advice in this life. You'll look back on it and laugh, they say, and you do. What you laugh at is the advice.

What I've been thinking about is Jerry Lewis. Jerry and his telethon, and Labor Day when the working man should rest. The year Ray and I were married had a Labor Day in it, a hard day that cut the summer off for good.

Something you look back on the most and laugh about the least, I suppose.

You must believe I love him. I do, I swear it. But it's been a long time of everything halfway and nothing beautiful for me, and all I have left is the love. It's turning into background noises, everyday a little more.

You could say we squandered our youth. I think we just spent it, a little here, a little there. But you've got to understand how it was then. We were in grade school when Kennedy—

Well. When Kennedy.

It was cool to be in love. Love was in, and we were in love. We graduated from high school the year they stopped electing homecoming queens. Then we got married.

Remember when Cissy on "Family Affair" started going out with a hippie? She started wearing orange and yellow paisley lounging pajamas with fuzzy chenille balls hanging off the sleeves. Uncle Bill came to the pad they hung out at and hustled her right back to the penthouse. He knew.

Cissy wanted to leave. She liked the flowers and said that things were groovy and far out, but Cissy was Cissy and that pageboy hair-do was in her blood. That's the way I was then, playing at being radical. "Cissy drops out", you know. Folk songs were nice and a

little grass was, of course, groovy, but Ray still wouldn't call black people anything but niggers.

Still won't.

It couldn't 've happened to a nicer couple. That was the tragedy. But we would be the first to tell you that most people misuse the word tragedy. A tragedy doesn't need sad things and orphans. All it needs is love.

We had a little apartment over the hardware store, a hide-a-bed and two beanbag chairs. We were doing all right. No, we really were. Sit tight and stick it out, they say. So I got some extra hours at K-Mart. I couldn't get the "59th Street Bridge Song" out of my mind. I was sitting tight. I was sticking it out.

Labor Day steamed then. The sun made the lawn brittle as hipbones. At night the moon shattered through our windows in dusty wafers drier still. It's those days I find fault with this place, the breadbasket of America, they say.

It was only one of those twenty-four hour things. Sunday night I was running a fever, and I couldn't keep anything down. Not even applesauce. When I was little and I got sick, my mother would give me an enamel dish full of applesauce with a big souvenir soup spoon, and turn the radio to dance stations.

Ray pulled the couch out and went to bed. He doesn't like sick people. He doesn't even admit it when he gets sick, it seems to insult him. So, there was nothing for me to do but sit there beside him in the dark, watching Jerry Lewis and the totals on the board in far away Las Vegas flashing through the night. Like motel signs. He breathed like the quiver of a bowstring beside me. I felt hollowed out. In my family, being sick wasn't a quiet thing. I'd be up, then Mom would be up. Then we'd talk a little too loud and Judy'd be up. On with the light. Sooner or later enough of us were up that there wasn't any reason to go back to bed. Then Dad made big greasy fried egg sandwiches, and they'd move out back to the big sleeping porch so as not to make me any sicker. But they'd leave the screen door open and yell in at me until the stars faded and the grease congealed in the skillet. Being sick was a friendly thing.

Ray would say we were just the kind of people who ate in the kitchen and didn't know any better.

We didn't know any better because there isn't any better.

Ray rolled over in bed and looked up at me. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay."

"How okay are you?" He wasn't quite awake. He put his hand between my legs.

"Not that okay."

He sat up beside me. "Jerry Lewis?"

"Uh-huh."

"Why do you have the sound all the way down?" Ray threw the covers off and went to the window. He looked down at our car. He did it every night; it was muscle memory. He'd built the whole thing up from the frame, and it stood like glittering granite as the fog ran up from the river, the fins Ray'd pounded out of sheet metal, tense and hungry.

"I can't stand listening to him," I said.

"He's funny."

"He 's stupid." I sighed and closed my eyes to a headache flittering around me.

"He's a genius in France, Midge," he said.

"He's what?"

"He's a genius in France."

"They think he is."

"No, he is." Ray yawned and scratched his face. "Jerry Lewis is a genius in France."

"They call him that." I got up. I switched on the lightbulb. It swung from the ceiling like the announcer's mike at the fights.

"He is though. In France." Ray followed me to the Frigidaire and we both stood in front of the open door, the cold white air breaking over us.

I slammed the door. "Jerry Lewis is not a genius!" On television, a chorus line kicked in mute precision.

"Is so, in France," my husband said.

"You're either a genius all over or you're not a genius at all!" My stomach turned over once. "God Ray, leave me alone, I'm sick, I'm a sick woman, go away," I said. I went to our little phonograph and put on Simon and Garfunkel. The songs whined out, heavy on treble, warped and unsteady as an old drunk.

I'm sorry," Ray said, though he wasn't and stood very close behind me. He hesitated then went to the refrigerator and pulled out a hunk of orange cheese wrapped in wax paper. He grabbed the filet knife out of the drainboard. "Most of this cheese is hard." Ray tossed the knife from one hand to another, quick little tosses.

"Cut it off."

"God !" Ray threw the knife into the sink. "Midge, it's almost all hard, all the fucking way through."

"If it bothers you so much, throw it out." There was to be no sleep that night.

Ray pushed the cheese down the disposal and ground it through. It sounded like all the bones in the world breaking. The sink jumped and shuddered under his touch, like he would have me.

"I just wish you'd be more careful, you know, with the cheese." Ray looked into the sink, clutching the edge as if to save himself

from drowning.

"How do you know it was me?"

"You think it was me."

"You're quick, Ray," I said. I said, "You're a real sharp one, you are." The hum of the refrigerator suddenly clicked into a lower buzz.

Ray snapped his gaze. "I don't need to take this shit from you," he said, his voice hard — fast, flat and bitter as the interstate.

"What is with you?" I saw tiny lights dance over him. My fever made the night even more nightmarish, Simon and Garfunkle pounded on the phonograph and Jerry silently watched us from a crazy land without horizontal hold.

"Nothing is with me. Nobody is with me."

"No ." I shook my head. "Huh-uh. Nobody is with me! You — I hate you." I flew to the neat row of cupboards above our thirdhand stove. "You know, I arranged the spice cupboard, okay, and I put parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme right in a row in front, and I've been waiting for you to notice, because it's something you would have noticed. You would've told me how cute I was for doing that."

"You're mad because I don't read the spice cabinet."

"You're a jerk because you know Simon and Garfunkle is our group."

"You arrange some spices three months ago and I'm supposed to shoot off over it."

"You know the rest of them are in alphabetical order from allspice on down to white pepper, you shithead!"

Ray stared at me for a long, terrible time. "Well, screw this," he said raggedly. He sagged onto the bed.

Simon and Garfunkle sang "The Boxer." The part about the whores on Seventh Avenue. It made me feel like an extra in one of those street scenes from *Midnight Cowboy*.

But the only reason I knew what an extra was, was from reading those movie star magazines.

And the whores here in the breadbasket of America are old, tired women in heels.

"You don't love me," Ray said.

"Of course I do."

"You're not in love with me," he mumbled, and hid his face in my nightgown.

"What's the difference?"

"Plenty of difference. You can love a parade, but you can't be in love with a parade, see?"

"Depends on who's marching," I said. I don't know what I meant. Still don't.

I picked polish off my fingernails like slivers of cherry candy. I

threw him a look. He threw it back.

"I'm sorry," I said.

He said, "I love you."

"I know."

"Are you okay?" he asked, and this time I proved that I was.

After Ray went to sleep, I made a paper flower and hung it from the lightbulb. The fever broke around dawn and Jerry topped the year before in pledges.

A little while after that, Ray and his friend Jim got in a fight over a bet and Jim took a sledgehammer to Ray's car. He cut a fine figure in the night. The happy assassin.

I'm sticking it out. Ray works at Firestone.

Here with the sad things and orphans, the tragedy is thick as mortar and slows me down.

Nobody says groovy anymore.

I'm stuck.

